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# Japan's Kissinger? Yachi Shōtarō: The State Behind the Curtain

Giulio Pugliese

## ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

This article reassesses the 2006 and, tentatively, the 2014 reset in Sino-Japanese relations to argue in favour of an increasingly state-centric understanding of Japanese diplomacy. By making use of a narrative account and a variety of primary sources—including personal memoirs, elite interviews, participatory observation, and leaked State Department cables—this article finds that Abe Shinzō's foreign policy confidante, Yachi Shōtarō, embodied the unmatched influence of government actors in Japan's political landscape. The article provides a close-up portrait of Yachi, with an emphasis on his preference for geopolitics, strategy, and secret diplomacy. Yachi and the institutional apparatus he represented sought détente with Japan's main strategic adversary, while pushing for geopolitical initiatives that targeted China. The article concludes by arguing that the Abe administration's insistence on, and institutionalized practice of, conducting public affairs in secret will likely further strengthen the role of the nation-state and of government actors in Japan, also in light of growing geopolitical tensions in East Asia.

**Keywords:** Japan-China relations, Yachi Shōtarō, Japanese foreign policy making, secret diplomacy, strategy, Yasukuni Shrine

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## 1. Introduction: Informal Actors Take the Lead?

Globalization has added a substantial degree of complexity to world affairs. Yet, recent trends in international politics, exemplified in 2016 and 2017 by the return of identity politics, nativist populism, and charismatic leadership, demonstrate the nation-state's comeback. This article complicates this picture to argue that the nation-state and elite policy

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<sup>1</sup> The author is particularly grateful for the support received by Barak Kushner during his PhD, including letters of reference and introductions, and would like to thank Professor Hugo Dobson, Caroline Rose, Glenn Hook, Matsuoka Misato, and the other participants in the Informal Political Actors in Japan Workshop, 15–16 January 2016. The author also appreciates the input provided by Dr. John Nilsson-Wright. While the information presented is not sensitive, the author has opted for anonymizing most of the interview subjects.

makers have consistently been central to the conduct of public affairs, and their influence has increased well before the crisis of globalization. After all, post-Cold War Sino-Japanese relations have grown increasingly complex, thus augmenting the impact of Japanese domestic politics and informal actors in bilateral relations.<sup>2</sup> *Prima facie*, the increased relevance of non-state actors has dispelled state-centred realist appreciations of Japan's China policy.<sup>3</sup> In fact, scholars and practitioners have often stressed the constructive role played by a variety of informal and non-state actors in the management of Japan-China relations: emphasizing functional cooperation advanced by region-wide epistemic communities;<sup>4</sup> underlining the logic of integration through people-to-people exchanges and cultural proximity;<sup>5</sup> envisioning deepened economic engagement due to Japanese enterprises' lobbying on the basis of substantial interests in the Chinese market;<sup>6</sup> or stressing the proactive role of sub-state actors and Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in soothing bilateral relations, possibly as a tool of Japanese soft power in China.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting the nature of this understanding, the literature came to appreciate the formative role of informal actors in bringing about the easing of tensions between Japan and China.

Notably, in 2006 and in 2014 the two governments demonstrated engagement in easing bilateral political tensions. Earlier the bone of contention was prime ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. More recently, the standoff over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has been chiefly responsible for souring bilateral political relations to their lowest point since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972. Yet, as an indication of Japan's complex domestic sociopolitical landscape, the literature diluted the relevance of formal political actors to focus, instead, on the inherently postmodern quality to Japan's polity and values at the end of the Cold War, a trait also highlighted by influential Japanese scholars with particular reference to Japan's pacifism.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars focused on Diet members and "friendship diplomacy" as the loci for improving relations at the leadership level in 2006. Karol Żakowski's research on Diet members' diplomacy between

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<sup>2</sup> Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Green, *Japan's Reluctant Realism: foreign policy challenges in an era of uncertain power* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Kent Calder and Min Ye, *The Making of Northeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Utpal Vyas, "Japan's international NGOs: a small but growing presence in Japan-China relations," *Japan Forum* 22, no. 3–4 (2010): 467–490.

<sup>6</sup> Jitsurō Terashima, *Sekai o shiru chikara* [The Power to Know the World] (Tokyo: PHP Kenkyūjo, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Akio Takahara, "Japanese NGOs in China," in *Japan's Relations with China: Facing a Rising Power*, ed. Peng-Er Lam (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 166–179.

<sup>8</sup> Akihiko Tanaka, *Atarashii chūsei* [The New Middle Ages] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 1996); Shin'ichi Kitaoka, *Gurōbaru pureiyā to shite no Nihpon* [Japan as a Global Player] (Tokyo: NTT Shuppan, 2010), 17–19.

2001 and 2012 has shown that during major diplomatic crises, the Japanese and Chinese governments were able to maintain solid channels of communication through informal political “pipelines” hailing from the ruling parties.<sup>9</sup> Caroline Rose came to similar conclusions specific to the 2006 track II missions undertaken by Japanese Diet members in China.<sup>10</sup> Specific to the actual leverage of Japanese politicians over Abe Shinzō’s 2006 overtures to China, Cheung suggests that Abe conceded on visits to the Yasukuni in exchange for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) establishment’s support, an ambiguous change of heart dictated by political survival.<sup>11</sup> Politicians sympathetic to China have traditionally played a role in the management of Sino-Japanese relations and their input seemed significant in 2006. They are important informal political actors who have considerably smoothed Japan-China relations throughout the postwar years.

In the early twenty-first century, the very functionalism and deepening ties between Japan and China implied not only the rise of regional production networks and economic interdependence, but also deepening epistemic communities among policy makers and intellectuals, who may often exert a considerable influence in policy making.<sup>12</sup> According to this logic, people-to-people cooperation functioned on its own merits, as evidenced by the networking quality of venues such as the Boao Forum of Asia.<sup>13</sup> This China-sponsored venue testified, after all, to quiet diplomacy between Fukuda Yasuo and his Chinese counterparts already in 2013.<sup>14</sup> With regard to the 2014 détente, former prime minister Fukuda Yasuo—a politician traditionally understood as sympathetic to China—was key to amending ties between the conservative Abe and Xi Jinping governments, seemingly corroborating the above scholarly claims, as well as an original appreciation for former prime ministers’ diplomacy.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, NGOs have also facilitated the resumption of Japan-China dialogue. The Tokyo-Beijing Forum—inaugurated in 2005 by the Japanese non-profit organization Genron NPO—is often appreciated among scholars and practitioners as a harbinger of a new era of diplomacy, one that Genron NPO’s leader does not hesitate in calling a “new civil diplomacy,” or a

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<sup>9</sup> Karol Żakowski, “Nihon no taichū giin gaikō: 2001–2012nen” [Japan’s Diet Members China Diplomacy: 2001–2012], Keiō University Presentation, field notes and readout graciously provided by Dr. Karol Żakowski, 18 June 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Rose, “Sino-Japanese Relations after Koizumi and the Limits of New-Era Diplomacy,” in *China, Japan and Regional Leadership in East Asia*, ed. Christopher Dent (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2008), 52–66.

<sup>11</sup> Mong Cheung, “Political survival and the Yasukuni controversy in Sino-Japanese relations,” *The Pacific Review* 23, no. 4 (2010): 527–548.

<sup>12</sup> Misato Matsuoka, “Cultural Hegemony and the Role of Intellectuals in Japanese Foreign Policy,” Informal Political Actors in Japan Workshop, 15–16 January 2016, Baslow Hall, United Kingdom.

<sup>13</sup> Calder and Ye, *The Making of Northeast Asia*, 129–157.

<sup>14</sup> “Fukuda, Xi plan second meeting at Boao Forum in Beijing,” *Japan Times*, 25 October 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Hugo Dobson and Caroline Rose, “Former Prime Ministers as Foreign Policy Actors,” Informal Political Actors in Japan Workshop, 15–16 January 2016.

“discussion-based diplomacy.”<sup>16</sup> Did informal actors, such as Diet members, non-governmental actors, and epistemic-communities diplomacy, pave the way for Sino-Japanese political rapprochement in 2006?

Events leading to the 2006 détente seemingly validate the agency of informal political actors. Diet members’ groups sustained the bottom-up diplomatic push for a resumption of bilateral ties. In 2006 the “Japan-China Ruling Coalition Exchange Association” was the most prominent such group and it paved the way for bilateral communication; importantly, LDP Policy Research Council chairman, Nakagawa Hidenao, led the Japanese delegation. Nakagawa was an influential and conservative representative who acted as “guardian” to then Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe, the most likely politician to succeed Koizumi Junichirō to the premiership in late summer 2006.<sup>17</sup> Several interviews testified to the incubator role Nakagawa played in resetting China and Japan relations precisely because of his conservative colours and the Abe link.<sup>18</sup> The first LDP-New Komeito (NK) ruling coalition visit to Beijing in February 2006 was symptomatic of China’s initial indisposition against the conservative camp, because Chinese counterparts preferred relating to old China hands, such as Nikai Toshihiro.<sup>19</sup> By mid-summer 2006, however, Nakagawa would arrange an informal meeting between Chief Cabinet Secretary (CCS) Abe and Chinese counterparts that included Ambassador Wang Yi.<sup>20</sup> While it is hard to state with certainty whether specific promises were made over Yasukuni Shrine visits, the meeting provided the first, covert reassurance that Koizumi’s successor was on board the bilateral reset.

A public indication of the working-level agreement came at the Genron NPO Tokyo-Beijing Forum of 3 August 2006, when Kudō Yasushi remembered Ambassador Wang Yi’s confident premonitory words prior to CCS Abe’s surprise visit: “we are going to make history today.”<sup>21</sup> To the astonishment of a noted China scholar present there, Abe would read a surprisingly conciliatory speech that stressed the importance of bilateral relations.<sup>22</sup> In

<sup>16</sup> Yasushi Kudō, *Genron gaikō: Higashi Ajia ni okeru kadai kaiketsu no tame no atarashii minkan gaikō* [Discussion-based Diplomacy: East Asia’s New Civil Diplomacy for Resolving Problems] (Tokyo: NC Communication, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> “Koizumi-go e, Nicchū shidō Nikai Keisanshō-ra kaidan” [Towards the Post-Koizumi Era: Japan and China Make their Moves—METI Minister Nikai and Others Meet for Talks], *Asahi Shinbun*, 23 February 2006, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Person involved in arranging the Abe-Wang meeting under condition of anonymity, tape recording, Tokyo, 2013; person involved in arranging the Abe-Wang meeting under condition of anonymity, tape recording, Tokyo, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> “Koizumi-go e, Nicchū shidō Nikai Keisanshō-ra kaidan.”

<sup>20</sup> Person involved in arranging the Abe-Wang meeting under condition of anonymity, tape recording, Tokyo, 2013; person involved in arranging the Abe-Wang meeting under condition of anonymity, tape recording, Tokyo, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Head of Genron NPO Kudō Yasushi, tape recording, Tokyo, 3 September 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Shinzō Abe, “Giron to taiwa de, pātonā no kankei ni higuruma wo ugokasō” [Let’s Change Gear in Bilateral Relations through Debates and Dialogue], in *Dai 2 Kai Tōkyō-Beijing Fōramu – 2006nen Tōkyō* [The Second Tokyo-Beijing Forum—2006 Tokyo], ed. Genron NPO (Tokyo: Genron NPO, 2006): 16–17; Japanese scholar, tape recording, Tokyo, 11 January 2013; high-ranking MOFA official, tape recording, Tokyo, 24 June 2013.

plain sight, Diet members' diplomacy and the Japanese think-tank showcased signs of the forthcoming bilateral reset.

This paper argues against the literature emphasizing the relative and increasing impact of informal actors in Japanese foreign policy making. Instead, it demonstrates how state agencies acted as *kuromaku*: those who act behind the scenes in Japanese theatre, setting the stage and assisting the actors in full view of the audience. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) bureaucrats accompanied the "Japan-China Ruling Coalition Exchange Association" delegations and often wrote the script and registered the interactions between Japanese and Chinese representatives from the ruling parties. Similarly, the overtures witnessed in summer 2006 were carefully choreographed by MOFA. Prior even to Abe becoming prime minister, evidence proves that selected MOFA *kuromaku* devised the so-called "ambiguous strategy" that aimed at depoliticizing the Yasukuni Shrine issue.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the speech read by Abe at the Genron NPO venue was crafted by MOFA strategist Akiba Takeo, the then newly appointed head of the China and Mongolia Division.<sup>24</sup> Selected people from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the lead in setting the scene for the 2006 détente, to the point that it was Administrative Vice-Minister "Yachi Shōtarō who oversaw everything."<sup>25</sup>

Within MOFA, Yachi led Tokyo's back-channel overtures to China. It was Yachi and his task force who devised creative ways to put the Yasukuni Shrine issue on the backburner through an ambiguous "don't ask, don't tell" policy that successfully saved face for both Japanese and Chinese leaders.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, preliminary evidence indicates that Yachi carefully selected trusted, and skilled, diplomats specifically to deal with China: for instance, Akiba was neither an "Asianist" nor a "China-school" diplomat traditionally sensitive to Chinese remonstrations on the history issue. According to one author, Yachi appointed the "American School" diplomat to the unusual position in 2006 to advance a new China strategy.<sup>27</sup> The China task force would also work on quiet, but key, bilateral negotiations with Ambassador Wang and State Councillor Dai Bingguo, because they enjoyed the trust of China's heads of government, like Yachi did with Japan's equivalents.<sup>28</sup> Yachi and Dai inaugurated these secretive meetings as early as mid-2005,<sup>29</sup> and they would

<sup>23</sup> High-ranking MOFA official, tape recording, Tokyo, 24 June 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Japanese scholar, tape recording, Tokyo, 11 January 2013; High-ranking MOFA official, written notes, Tokyo, 4 August 2014.

<sup>25</sup> High-ranking MOFA official, written notes, Tokyo, 4 August 2014.

<sup>26</sup> High-ranking MOFA official, tape recording, Tokyo, 24 June 2013; high-ranking MOFA official, tape recording, Tokyo, 22 July 2013; high-ranking MOFA official, written notes, Tokyo, 4 August 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Giulio Pugliese, "Kantei Diplomacy? Japan's Hybrid Leadership in Foreign and Security Policy," *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 2 (2017): 152–168.

<sup>28</sup> Yūji Miyamoto, *Korekara Chūgoku to dō tsukiauka* [How to Confront China from Now On?], (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbun Shuppansha, 2011), 136–181; interview with scholar, tape recording, Tokyo, 11 July 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Shōtarō Yachi, *Gaikō no senryaku to kokorozashi: zen gaimu jimu jikan Yachi Shōtarō wa kataru* [The Aims and Ambitions of Diplomacy: Former Administrative Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Yachi Shōtarō Speaks Out] (Tokyo: Sankei Shinbun Shuppan, 2009), 33–40.

eventually set the stage for the late 2006 rapprochement. The state was very much in command of Japanese overtures to China, while informal actors were ancillary to state-led initiatives.

Along these lines, this article advances a Yachi-centred picture of Tokyo's overtures to China to reassess the role of informal actors in Japanese policy making. After preparing the groundwork for geopolitical overtures aimed at China, a Yachi-led foreign policy executive promoted bilateral summit diplomacy. In other words, Tokyo pursued a sterner policy against Beijing in order to negotiate from a position of strength the terms of the "Japan-China Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests." Following Abe's comeback and the flare up of the post-2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu standoff, Abe advanced the same strategy to tame a more assertive China and return to a semblance of the Japan-China Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests. This article presents this strategy as the offspring of Yachi's geopolitical vision and further demonstrates that Yachi has been in the driver's seat of Japan-China negotiations leading to the 2006 Sino-Japanese détente. The article details Yachi's influence in paving Abe's way to summit diplomacy with the Chinese leadership, and closes with a brief, preliminary reassessment of the road to the very timid détente of 2014.

## 2. Methodology

Most of the interviews presented took place between September 2012 and August 2014, and they were semi-structured, through carefully prepared "interview guides." At the same time, interviews were open-ended to tackle the interviewees' knowledge and flow of thoughts.<sup>30</sup> Apart from gathering information on institutional and individual behaviour, face-to-face interviews were used to reconstruct the reasons and intentions of Yachi, because "the foreign policy behaviour of states depends on how individuals with power perceive and analyze situations."<sup>31</sup> Along with Carlsnaes' framework, the explanation of Tokyo's China policy necessarily starts from the interpretation of the motivations, preferences, and intentions of the leading foreign and security policy makers under scrutiny: the so-called ideational dimension.<sup>32</sup> The basic aim will be to interpret the foreign policy actor's motivations and explain, also by citing previous works, the political process behind the Japanese government's China policy. To that end, this interpretative approach

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<sup>30</sup> Linus Hagström, *Japan's China Policy: A relational power analysis* (Abingdon, Oxon: 2005), 76–77.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1990), 74.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Carlsnaes, "Actors, Structures, and Foreign Policy Analysis," in *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, eds. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Timothy Dunne (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 97–99, 85–100.



adopts detailed descriptions and the humility proper of historical accounts. As understood by Gaddis, process-tracing and historical narratives qualify as a useful common ground for political science and history “to extract generalities from unique sequences of events.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the conceptualization of Japan’s China policy and of Japanese leadership in foreign policy making is quintessentially Weberian: ideal types, or concepts such as those provided by international relations theory (i.e., balancing, engagement, containment, etc.), are “ultimately heuristic devices able to highlight patterns or phenomena to which we attach a particular interest or meaning.”<sup>34</sup> The echoes of recent Sino-Japanese history, highlighted in this article, may prove as valuable as political science’s “predictive” toolkit in understanding bilateral relations at the time of writing.

Finally, Yachi’s preferred policies and ideological preferences are based on the author’s close scrutiny of publicized primary sources: manifestos, memoirs, and policy articles. At the same time, their content was not taken at face value since they are often self-serving in nature. For this reason, these sources have undergone triangulation with additional primary sources, such as leaked State Department cables, interviews, and participatory observation with Ambassador Yachi. Extensive fieldwork allowed the author to participate in Yachi Shōtarō’s joint courses for Waseda, Keiō, and Tokyo University students in the autumn of 2012, months prior to Abe’s unexpected comeback. While such interaction was limited to participation in six gatherings, this study has benefitted greatly from this access.

### 3. Yachi Shōtarō: Japan’s Kissinger?

Yachi was Foreign Minister (FM) Asō Tarō and Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe’s leading diplomatic advisor. After becoming prime minister, Abe confirmed Asō as foreign minister and Yachi as MOFA’s top bureaucrat: administrative vice-minister (AVM). It is worth noting that, precisely with Yachi’s 2005 appointment, Japan’s AVMs would turn into key strategic players with substantial leverage in policy formulation, personnel appointments, and, quite unusually, the first-hand conduct of diplomacy.<sup>35</sup> Yet, Yachi epitomized such a hyper-empowered bureaucrat as AVM in 2005 to 2007, but also as cabinet counsellor and head of the National Security Secretariat following Abe’s comeback in 2012. Yachi’s authority was indicative of his deep bond of trust with Abe, who prided himself on his presidential leadership style. The Abe-Yachi bond originated from a shared appreciation of power politics.

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<sup>33</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “History, Theory, and Common Ground,” *International Security* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 75–85.

<sup>34</sup> Elisabetta Brighi, *Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and International Relations: The Case of Italy* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ryō Nakamura, MOFA director of the Policy Planning Division, Foreign Policy Bureau, tape recording, Tokyo, 12 September 2013.



As argued elsewhere, their leadership style, their worldview, and their active engagement in foreign and security policy resemble the relationship between Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. In contrast to the famous US proponents of a strategic *realpolitik*, their Japanese equivalents added to that an idealism, albeit of a different intensity, that was preoccupied with the recovery of Japan's lost pride and sense of purpose.

### **3.1. Yachi and the Respect for Wakaizumi Kei**

Yachi is a conservative idealist. His writings and first-hand accounts betray his uneasiness in the regimented world of Japanese bureaucracy. Direct testimonies from one US-Japan alliance handler, who has known Yachi for a long time, substantiate that he stood out from the MOFA crowd early in his foreign policy career, given his strategic vision and appreciation for security issues.<sup>36</sup> After all, Yachi shared an important similarity with Abe, a will rooted in traditional notions of honour and sincerity (*magokoro*, i.e., a man who honestly follows his obligations), which he explicitly linked to his mentor's role model, Wakaizumi Kei (see below). He sensed his job entailed grave responsibilities for the sake of the country's security and prosperity, and these needed to be pursued consistently without abandoning personal conservative ideals. This romanticized right-wing idealism is evident from Yachi's reference to the Buddhist paradise, where he aims at winning his father's approval for responding to Japan's call of duty as the country's first-ever head of the National Security Secretariat;<sup>37</sup> it is also evident from Yachi's sad dreams of young kamikaze pilots headed for suicidal missions. That those dreams moved Yachi to the point he entertained the possibility of being the reincarnation of a kamikaze pilot implies that he has a markedly more value-laden (and conservative) definition of the "national interest," a recurring word in his small book of memoirs.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the original Kissinger, who would establish the successful and influential advisory and networking company Kissinger and Associates, Yachi's decision to head the NSS was at the expense of a lucrative business career.<sup>39</sup> That is, a self-denying commitment drove Yachi's career as a public servant.

Not unlike Abe's right-wing idealism, Yachi was perfectly conscious that his views placed him in the minority in the stiffly risk-adverse Japanese establishment. Also for this reason, he embarked on an active reconstruction of his personal legacy following his retirement from MOFA in 2007. He did so through active engagement in political debate, but also by holding

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<sup>36</sup> Former high-ranking US foreign policy official, written notes, Tokyo, 22 July 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Toshikawa Takao, "Sonzaikan fuyasu Yachi kokka anzen hoshō kyokuchō: Obama Seiken no irei no kōgū" [The Growing Reach of Yachi, Head of National Security Secretariat: Unprecedented Treatment from the Obama Administration], *Yūkan Fuji: Nagatachō – Kasumigaseki Insaido*, 28 January 2014, ([www.zakzak.co.jp/smp/society/politics/news/20140128/plt1401280736001-s.htm](http://www.zakzak.co.jp/smp/society/politics/news/20140128/plt1401280736001-s.htm)), accessed on 18 February 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Yachi, *Gaikō no senryaku to kokorozashi: zen gaimu jimu jikan Yachi Shōtarō wa kataru*, 1–3; 23–27.

<sup>39</sup> Scholar specializing in the politics of the Asia-Pacific, written notes, Tokyo, 12 June 2015.

seminars for mostly young bureaucratic-cadre prospects hailing from three of Japan's most prestigious universities (see above). In fact, Yachi was attracted to international politics and area studies from his university years and flirted with the idea of doing academic research. Instead, he was convinced by leading and secretive scholar Wakaizumi Kei to join MOFA. Lodging at Wakaizumi's house for roughly one year, Yachi would learn the ropes and the sense of purpose behind the management of Japan's foreign policy and diplomacy without abandoning a sense of inadequacy regarding the diplomatic elite.<sup>40</sup> Similar to the ideological continuum between Abe and Kishi Nobusuke, Wakaizumi acted almost as a father-like figure to Yachi and it is worth shedding light on him.

Wakaizumi Kei was Prime Minister Satō Eisaku's secret envoy to Washington, DC in 1969, to negotiate the reversion of Okinawa and the secretly agreed transit of US nuclear weapons to the archipelago at times of emergency.<sup>41</sup> Wakaizumi was a somewhat influential academic, with extensive ties to US government officials, who was driven both by a geopolitical realism informed by the logic of balancing and a need to restore a sense of purpose to postwar Japan's embattled spirit.<sup>42</sup> According to him, Japan had to reassert prominence in the Asia Pacific, especially through its sea power. In the early 1990s he would reveal the secret negotiations with Kissinger and Nixon as a means to make his countrymen realize that they were living in a "fools' paradise" (*gusha no rakuen*) characterized by insular pacifism and over-reliance on US military protection in a potentially very dangerous post-Cold War environment. According to Yachi, his mentor's "suicide" in 1996—a consequence of Wakaizumi's decision to let a fatal illness take its natural course<sup>43</sup>—was less a consequence of LDP and policy officials' denial and criticism over his revelations of the "secret agreements," than his dismay in not being able to "ignite" (*hi o tsukeru*) the younger generation with his vision of Japan.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Yachi understood Japan as an "abnormal" country.

Wakaizumi saw himself as a realist. In this regard, he was similar to another prominent Japanese scholar, Kōsaka Masataka. Kōsaka had made his reputation in 1964 with a path-breaking essay, "On Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru," that detailed Yoshida's early decision to focus on economic growth

<sup>40</sup> Yachi, *Gaikō no senryaku to kokorozashi: zen gaimu jimu jikan Yachi Shōtarō wa kataru*, 15–22.

<sup>41</sup> Wakaizumi Kei, *The best course available: a personal account of the secret U.S.-Japan Okinawa reversion negotiations*, ed. John Swenson-Wright, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Shōtarō Yachi and Teshima Ryūichi, "Taidan Okinawa kaku mitsuyaku wa Beikoku no wana datta no ka? Wakaizumi Kei ga jisatsu shite made" [A Conversation: The Secret Nuclear Agreement in Okinawa was an American Trap? Until Wakaizumi's Suicide] *Chūō Kōron* 125, no. 9 (September 2010): 38–49; Shōtarō Yachi, "Wakaizumi Kei 'tsuyoi Nihon - yowai Shina' kara 'tsuyoi Chūgoku - yowai Nihon' ni (tekichū shita yogen)" [Wakaizumi Kei's Correct Prediction: from a Strong Japan-Weak China to a Strong China-Weak Japan] *Bungei Shunjū* 88 (10 August): 285–287.

<sup>43</sup> Romano Vulpitta, disciple of Wakaizumi Kei, e-mail correspondence, 12 March 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Shōtarō Yachi and Teshima Ryūichi, "Taidan Okinawa kaku mitsuyaku wa Beikoku no wana datta no ka? Wakaizumi Kei ga jisai shite made."

at the expense of traditional power politics, the so-called “Yoshida Doctrine/line.”<sup>45</sup> However, unlike Kōsaka, Wakaizumi was critical of Japan’s emasculation arising from Yoshida’s preoccupation with economic issues. For both Wakaizumi and his disciple, Yachi, finding a means to bolster Japan’s autonomy by promoting a new national security strategy for the country became a key element of their professional careers. In this endeavour, their thinking closely paralleled the ideological emphasis of both Kishi and Abe, who were driven by a desire to outgrow the Yoshida line straightjacket, a preoccupation that figured highly in the Abe agenda and the LDP’s anti-mainstream nationalist camp.

Thus, Wakaizumi informed the formulation of the 1977 “Fukuda Doctrine,” named after conservative Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo’s policy declaration.<sup>46</sup> Said “doctrine” contained a defined policy compass that aimed at outgrowing the passivity of the postwar Yoshida line. While holding to a solid US-Japan alliance, Japan would have developed a “heart-to-heart” understanding of the region, to mark a re-entry in Asia. In order to do so, Japan would have increased its economic presence, but also its cultural diplomacy and political profile.<sup>47</sup> Fukuda’s foreign policy line came to be known as “omnidirectional peace diplomacy” (*zenhōi heiwa gaikō*), and ought not to be confused with “equidistant diplomacy” (*tōkyōri gaikō*), because it was still premised on the primacy of US-Japan relations. Wakaizumi crafted the precepts of omnidirectional peace diplomacy, because he appreciated the US-Soviet détente as a mainstay of international affairs back in the mid-1970s.<sup>48</sup> Later on, his disenchantment with the post-Cold War environment would influence the policy outlook of Yachi. Mounting security threats and a similar nationalistic fire kept Wakaizumi’s protégé striving for a new Japan that more autonomously responded to nascent security challenges across the archipelago’s shores. China’s military rise was the leading challenge.

### **3.2. Yachi’s Ideological Axes: History and Geopolitics**

Yachi is driven by a geopolitically informed brand of power politics and the recovery of prestige. Direct testimonies and participatory observation point at the formative role played by the ideas of late Ambassador Okazaki Hisahiko, a noted diplomat and analyst who appreciated the merits of military might as a tool of statecraft.<sup>49</sup> Yachi explicitly and recurrently posits the pursuit of

<sup>45</sup> Kōsaka Masataka, *Kaiyō kokka nihon no kōsō* [A Vision of Japan as a Maritime Power], Chūkō Kurasshikkusu (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Andrea Pressello, “The Fukuda Doctrine and Japan’s Role in Shaping Post-Vietnam War Southeast Asia,” *Japanese Studies* 34, no. 1 (2014): 37–59.

<sup>47</sup> Suetō Sūdō, *The Fukuda Doctrine and ASEAN: new dimensions in Japanese foreign policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992), 152–156.

<sup>48</sup> Yoshihiko Morita, *Hyōden Wakaizumi Kei* [Wakaizumi Kei: A Critical Biography] (Tokyo: Bunshun, 2011), 232–245.

<sup>49</sup> “Yachi juku” [Yachi-led courses], Tokyo University Komaba Campus, participatory observation and written notes, 20 October 2012; Professor Nakanishi Terumasa, tape recording, Kyoto, 14 April 2014; Hisahiko Okazaki, *Kokusai jōsei handan hanseiki* [English title: A Half-Century on the Frontline of International Affairs] (Tokyo: Ikuhōsha, 2015).

the national interest as the ultimate driver of Japan's foreign policy, and complained about the lack of strategic thinking in foreign policy circles. According to him, strategy must be built upon the clear understanding of two pivotal axes: history and geopolitics. The first refers to the deleterious "feeling of dependency on the United States" (*Beikoku e no izon-shin*), which must be substituted with a sense of equality and cooperation built upon shared values and interests. An appreciation for "a rather generous" (*kanari no teido kanyōna*) American occupation favouring postwar Japan's very democratic system, economic growth, and security, need not have created a sense of dependency. Rather, Japan's noble historical impulse towards independence ought to be recovered, but not at the expense of or against its security partner.<sup>50</sup>

With regard to geopolitics, China is prominent in Yachi's reasoning. Yachi presents a traditional conservative realist appreciation of international politics, with explicit appreciation for the writings of scholars and practitioners such as E.H. Carr, Henry Kissinger, Okazaki, prewar British diplomat Harold Nicolson, and Robert Kagan.<sup>51</sup> Yachi cites the founding fathers of geopolitics—Alfred Mahan, Harold MacKinder, and Nicholas Spykman—and points at Japan's unchangeable geographical location and its role as a sea power, whose safeguard of the "rimland" is being confronted by China, a land power advancing into the oceans. According to Yachi, Japan needed to deepen its Trans-Pacific alliance and build a framework of cooperation with democratic "rimland" powers, especially naval ones. Said network would hold back China's growing reach over the Eurasian "heartland" that would lead, instead, to world domination.<sup>52</sup> Such bleak geopolitical appreciation propels Yachi's forceful China balancing.

Yachi's take on the nature of China matches his geopolitical apprehension. According to him, China's national character is imbued with a wounded pride, where force needs to be applied for the restoration of honour following the "Century of Humiliation." Hence, as China becomes the world's second-largest military power following the US, it is understandable that its behaviour becomes expansionist and aggressive. He then points to China's traditional vertical vision of the world based upon the sinocentric order, and at China's contradictory one-party dictatorship as lacking any set of principles and values that have appeal to other states. This, he remarks, is the greatest reason why China lacks legitimacy as a leader in international society. He then notes that economic growth cannot be the sole source of legitimacy and that the

<sup>50</sup> Shōtarō Yachi et al., "Sōkatsu zadankai—sōgōteki nichibei anzen hoshō kyōryoku ni mukete" [Closing Debate—Towards a Comprehensive Japan-U.S. Security Partnership], in *Nippon no gaikō to sōgōteki anzen hoshō* [Japan's Diplomacy and Comprehensive Security], ed. Shōtarō Yachi (Tokyo: Wedge, 2015), 392–393; 388–454.

<sup>51</sup> "Yachi juku," participatory observation and written notes, 20 October 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Shōtarō Yachi et al., "Sōkatsu zadankai—sōgōteki nichibei anzen hoshō kyōryoku ni mukete," 396–397.

PRC will likely face a setback, including a challenge to its autocratic system.<sup>53</sup> These remarks reflect not only Yachi's conservatism, but also his spiritual belief in the centrality of a country's moral fibre and in the moral superiority of democratic systems. Yachi's penchants and policy preferences were eventually condensed in the 2006 Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, which Yachi crafted with key MOFA personnel, such as Nobukatsu Kanehara.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Secrecy and Secret Diplomacy: An Informal Source of Japanese Leadership

It was an informal process, secret diplomacy, which considerably aided the leverage enjoyed by formal political actors. The use of quiet and informal communication practices is a long-established tradition in Japanese diplomacy. After all, first-hand authoritative American accounts confirm that "Japanese negotiating behavior tends to exhibit a strong desire for confidentiality."<sup>55</sup> Slow-paced, pluralistic, consensus-driven negotiations defined by bureaucratic parochialism were often conducted away from public scrutiny and followed by *ex post facto* public explanations and theatrics following agreement. Blaker, Giarra, and Vogel suggest that Japanese negotiating behavior is hardly assertive and heavily bureaucratic in nature. Specific to US-Japan negotiations, MOFA would repeatedly act in a coordinating role and in a way subservient to the US position for trade and security matters.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, evidence throughout postwar Japanese history highlights important exceptions that stress, in fact, the authority of prime ministers and their extensive use of personal emissaries and secret diplomacy in a clear top-down way.

After all, the secretive use of personal emissaries augments a political leader's influence over the decision-making process. For instance, Yoshida Shigeru sent trusted bureaucrats and politicians to the US and the United Kingdom to ensure smooth communication over the conditions for a peace treaty, including political and economic relations with the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China.<sup>57</sup> This practice allowed Yoshida to circumvent MOFA and to engage in direct communication with his American counterparts. In fact, with regard to the negotiation of the Peace and Security

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<sup>53</sup> Shōtarō Yachi et al., "Sōkatsu zadankai—sōgōteki nichibei anzen hoshō kyōryoku ni mukete," 415–417.

<sup>54</sup> Pugliese, "Kantei Diplomacy? Japan's Hybrid Leadership in Foreign and Security Policy."

<sup>55</sup> Patrick M. Cronin, "Conclusions," in *Case Studies in Japanese Negotiating Behavior*, eds. Michael Blaker, Paul Giarra, and Ezra Vogel (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 154.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Blaker, Paul Giarra, and Ezra Vogel, eds., *Case Studies in Japanese Negotiating Behavior*.

<sup>57</sup> Kokukin En (i.e., Yuan Keqin), *Amerika to Nikka kōwa* [The United States and the Japan-Republic of China Peace Treaty] (Tokyo: Kashiwa shobō, 2001), 121–122; Chōhin Chin, *Sengo Nihon no Chūgoku seisaku: 1950nendai higashi Ajia hokusai seiji no bunmyaku* [Post-war Japan's China Policy and East Asia's International Politics in the 1950s] (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2000), 102–103.

Treaty, Yoshida made ample use of Shirasu Jirō, a businessman, who acted as Yoshida's consigliere on foreign and security affairs.<sup>58</sup> Japan was not a neutral country during the Cold War, and it allowed the stationing of US troops as part of the 1951 US-Japan Security Treaty provisions. These details were also communicated through the offices of Shirasu, thus reinforcing Yoshida's grip on security affairs and eventually leading to Japan's recognition of the Republic of China.

Other Japanese leaders have pursued both formal and informal diplomatic overtures. Following Richard Nixon's shocking announcement in August 1971 of his plans to visit China, Prime Minister Satō Eisaku sent feelers to mainland China about a Japanese rapprochement as early as September of the same year. First, he assigned a political confidante with strong personal ties to the Satō family, Eguchi Masahiko, to approach the Chinese side through personal messages. But Satō and his secretary also wanted to quietly engage Beijing through formal channels, because the premier and his entourage did not fully trust Eguchi's skills and words. For this purpose, he employed the craft of Okada Akira, the Japanese consul in Hong Kong and a maverick diplomat.<sup>59</sup>

Dual-track negotiation channels are important in another respect. In case negotiations are successful, the informal back channel allows for gentlemen's agreements. For instance, the 1972 reversion of Okinawa was conducted through both formal and informal communication channels. However, Satō used Wakaizumi Kei as the sole trusted go-between for key aspects of the agreement, and the US counterpart was Kissinger himself. Along with the reversion of Okinawa, Wakaizumi negotiated secret protocols that granted the US military permission to station nuclear warheads in Okinawa and to allow their transit through the main islands. The secret agreements clashed with Satō's 1967 Three Non-Nuclear Principles, according to which Japan "will not manufacture or possess nuclear weapons or allow their introduction into the country." So secretive and controversial was the chasm between Satō's overt "three non-nuclear principles" and his covert acceptance of Washington's freedom to reintroduce nuclear warheads in Okinawa that no publicly available Japanese record would later substantiate Wakaizumi's exposé.<sup>60</sup> Wakaizumi's machinations were virtually unknown until his own revelations in 1994, with the exception of key political advisors and other officials.

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<sup>58</sup> United States Department of State, *Foreign relations of the United States, 1951. Asia and the Pacific*. (Washington, DC, 1951), 810.

<sup>59</sup> Masaya Inoue, *Nichū kokkō seijōka no seiji-shi* [A Political History of the Normalization of Japan-China Diplomatic Relations] (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppansha, 2010), 471–475.

<sup>60</sup> John Swenson-Wright, "Editor's Introduction," in Wakaizumi, *The Best Course Available: A Personal Account of the Secret U.S.-Japan Okinawa Reversion Negotiations*, 1–16.



#### **4.1. Yachi's and Abe's Preference for Secrecy**

The Yachi and Abe bond and their idiosyncratic use of secrecy embody the very continuity and centrality of formal actors in diplomatic affairs. After all, Satō Eisaku was Abe's great-uncle and Yachi learnt from Wakaizumi the ropes of *kuromaku* diplomacy. Moreover, Yachi's and Abe's preference for secrecy closely resembled the Nixon-Kissinger duo, the undisputed masters of "backchannel diplomacy" and control over information flows. Yachi departed from the afore-mentioned emissaries because he also qualified as one of the premier's most-respected strategists, underlying his Kissingerian qualities.

Evidence shows that Yachi came to appreciate the merits of deep control over information flow. According to several high-ranking officials, Yachi made repeated secret missions to China starting in 2005 and this practice continued during Abe's second mandate. Specific to Sino-Japanese relations, Yachi, like Wakaizumi, preferred to bypass the reporting conventions of the Foreign Ministry and relied on keeping discussions with his Chinese counterparts secret. One actor not only testified to Yachi's "famous capacity to disappear, as he did during our latest trip to China," but also revealed that he had never learnt the specifics of the overt "Japan-China Comprehensive Policy Dialogue" (*Nicchū sōgō seisaku taiwa*: 2005–2007) because its content was *never* transmitted through diplomatic cables.<sup>61</sup> Ambassador Miyamoto recognized Yachi's role as essential in bringing about the 2006 détente, but claimed ignorance of important details on its contents: "I think Yachi will carry his secrets to the grave."<sup>62</sup>

To be sure secrecy was paramount and aimed at maximizing the return on diplomatic investment: it shielded the talks from the opprobrium of leaks that would have aided foreign and domestic pressure groups, and aimed at a surprise effect to prop up the political leader's standing in the political theatre. More importantly, secrecy would have allowed backroom deals, such as the likely covert promise for the premier not to visit Yasukuni; in fact, if this information were known the political life of Abe would have been over. As a result, quiet bilateral talks leading to Abe's blitz Beijing summit meeting in October 2006 were fundamental in both regards. Yet, in 2014 the Abe administration strove for secrecy and pushed for a strict State Secrecy Protection Law.

After all, secrecy and informal diplomacy aid formal political actors in various ways. First, secrecy exemplified the penchant of Abe and Yachi for a quiet *realpolitik*: the Japanese government's utmost discretion and tougher secrecy rules were aimed not only at harmful third-party actors, such as Russia and China, but even at "like-minded states," whose "Five Eyes" espionage alliance granted the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand

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<sup>61</sup> Interview under the condition of anonymity, written notes, Tokyo, date left out due to request of interviewee.

<sup>62</sup> Yūji Miyamoto, former ambassador to Beijing, tape recording, 23 July 2013.



undisputed hegemony over signal and human intelligence. Second, secret diplomatic endeavours, in turn, empowered Yachi's own influence within the bureaucratic landscape and Abe's standing in the political one. Like Nixon and Kissinger, they aimed to circumvent bureaucratic agencies, because they did not trust the apparatus, not unlike Nixon's antipathy against agencies dominated by "Ivy League liberals."<sup>63</sup> Through an equally small group of advisers, their Japanese equivalents steered policy in their preferred direction, but at the cost of in-group bias. Third, secrecy over Yachi's activities meant that he propped up his personal political influence from the vagaries of bureaucratic politics. In connection to that, secrecy shielded Abe and Yachi from failure and possible media criticism fuelled by strategic leaks. Finally, secrecy likely resulted from an elitist understanding of the public administration, one where Abe administration officials and policy practitioners held a patronizing view of what constituted the national interest: it needed to be protected from sensational media exposure and emotional general public scrutiny. As a result, the Abe administration's preference for secrecy prevented access to important official records and impaired accountability in the decision-making system: 2013 Japanese legislation allowed the Yachi-led National Security Secretariat and the National Security Council to function without any obligation to record its minutes.<sup>64</sup> Secrecy was paramount to Japan's Kissinger and Nixon.

But how did policy change come about? The next section briefly details how the Yachi-centred foreign policy executive inaugurated a policy of China balancing centred in MOFA and, on the basis of that, negotiated the terms of the Sino-Japanese détente of 2006.

## **5. Negotiating with China from a Position of Strength: The Road to the 2006 Détente**

### ***5.1. Sticks...: Yachi-led China Balancing Takes Shape within MOFA***

Hailed as living proof of Japan's diplomatic engagement of China in 2006, Kokubun Ryōsei highlights Yachi's importance in holding meetings with his Chinese counterparts between 2005 and 2006 to resume top-level bilateral talks after Koizumi's resignation.<sup>65</sup> But, under the radar, Yachi proactively reorganized MOFA along his preferences for a balancing strategy that targeted China during the exact same period starting with his appointment

<sup>63</sup> Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: partners in power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 78–86.

<sup>64</sup> "Kakugi no gijiroku, hajimete kōkai—NSC ni mo sakusei gimu wo" [First-Ever Disclosure of Cabinet Minutes—Make the NSC Prepare Minutes Too], *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 22 April 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Ryōsei Kokubun, "Nichi-Bei-Chū no rikigaku ni okeru nicchū kankei to higashi Ajia kyōdōtai" [Japan-China Relations and East Asian Community in the Context of Japan-US-China Power Relations], in *Nichi-Bei-Chū toraianguru : sankakoku kyōchō e no michi* [The Japan-US-China Triangle and the Road to Trilateral Cooperation], eds. Ryōsei Kokubun, Jisi Wang, and Gerald L. Curtis (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2010), 32–47; 43–47.

as administrative vice-minister (AVM) in January 2005. Yachi's appointment as MOFA's top bureaucrat in lieu of the more moderate Takeuchi Yukio provided momentum for Japan's shift to China balancing. MOFA's personnel and institutional overhaul under Abe's watch as both chief cabinet secretary and premier points at the strategic use of his diplomatic consigliere's administrative prerogatives.

A Yachi-led MOFA consistently pursued openings to India and other regional powers, as key strategic partners with which Japan aimed to enhance its position of strength as "important components of Japan's overall strategy for dealing with the rise of China."<sup>66</sup> With initial strong coordination with the United States, Yachi prepared an institutional plan that prized South Asian diplomacy, setting up a new South Asian desk. Intelligence from the US embassy in Tokyo and authoritative insider accounts confirm the Yachi-led stance in setting up the new department within the Asia and Oceanian Affairs Bureau. The spark was the US-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 2005 and the high priority assigned to India under the attention of CCS Abe and Asō.<sup>67</sup>

From Yachi's personal memoirs it is claimed that the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP) was a new pillar of Japan's foreign policy, and that the concept was his idea. The AFP would have favoured the economic and political development of emerging economies and strategic states, stretching from Mongolia and the Korean Peninsula down to New Zealand, Australia, ASEAN, India, and up to Central Asia, the Baltic states and Scandinavia. Hence, the Eurasian "heartland" and "rimland" became pivotal. It did not include China, and indeed the arc orbited around the PRC, with the ill-concealed strategic aim of encircling it, an impression addressed and not denied in Yachi's memoir.<sup>68</sup> The other notable absent actor, Russia, was explicitly mentioned as the target of renewed strategic overtures, in order to solve the long-standing dispute over the Southern Kuriles/Northern Territories and sign a peace treaty.<sup>69</sup> Leaked cables confirm the rationale behind renewed efforts vis-à-vis Russia: "[avoiding] the risk that Moscow and Beijing might forge a closer strategic partnership—one that could provide unconstructive proposals. Japan hoped to drive a wedge between Russia and China."<sup>70</sup> Since the bold MOFA-led China balancing diplomatic agenda would slowly come into clearer shape around 2006, Yachi would lead negotiations

<sup>66</sup> US Embassy in Tokyo, "Ambassador's Lunch with Shōtarō Yachi," 6 March 2006, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/03/06TOKYO1159.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Yoshikazu Shimizu, "*Chūgoku mondai no uchimaku*" [Behind the Scenes of the 'China Problem'] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2008), 71–73; US Embassy in Tokyo, "MOFA reorganizes South Asia Department," 7 April 2006, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2006/04/06TOKYO1886.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Yachi, *Gaikō no senryaku to kokorozashi: zen gaimu jimu jikan Yachi Shōtarō wa kataru*, 142–145; 145.

<sup>69</sup> Yachi, *Gaikō no senryaku to kokorozashi: zen gaimu jimu jikan Yachi Shōtarō wa kataru*, 88–103.

<sup>70</sup> US Embassy in Tokyo, "Abe-Putin G-8 summit: Russia agrees to 'accelerate' talks on Northern Territories," 14 June 2007, <http://www.wikileaks.ch/cable/2007/06/07TOKYO2690.html>.

for the Japanese government to reset bilateral relations with China from a position of strength for Japan.

### **5.2. ...and Carrots: Tit-for-Tat at the Japan-China Comprehensive Policy Dialogue**

Following the strain in bilateral relations during the Koizumi years, and immediately after the April 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations in China, China's state councillor and Japan's AVM inaugurated a "comprehensive policy dialogue" to manage future potential crises and refer bilateral developments to the respective leadership. The dialogue would really pick up momentum in spring 2006, however; according to former ambassador to China, Miyamoto Yūji, these talks played the most significant role in "cutting a new path in Sino-Japanese relations" by inaugurating the mutually beneficial relations along strategic interests, with Abe's swift state visit to the PRC only days after assuming office in September 2006.<sup>71</sup>

Yachi was committed to resuming summit diplomacy for the sake of forging more stable bilateral relations and concluding negotiations on the joint development of the East China Sea (ECS). The goals were clear: halting unilateral gas drillings by Chinese companies on the east border of the Japan-claimed Exclusive Economic Zone in the ECS, and overcoming the politicization of the so-called history issue. Indicative of their limited engagement, Yachi underlines that by the time Chinese overtures in resuming bilateral summit diplomacy became clearer in May 2006, he and Abe had no desire to cement these positive trends by signing a fourth political document, unless China's leadership demonstrated its overcoming of historical "finger-pointing." China also acquiesced to Japan's ambiguous position on Taiwan, according to which Japan relinquishes sovereignty over the island, recognizes one China and fully understands China's claim that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the mainland, in line with the 1972 joint communiqué.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, it was Yachi's strategizing that led to the 2006 détente. In his memoirs, Yachi is adamant about the strategic use of the Yasukuni Shrine visits. A close reading hints at the logic of reciprocity, according to which concessions there were aimed at prompting openings from China on the history front and beyond. This logic governed the 2006 Japan-China "Strategic Mutually Beneficial Relationship" (SMBR) framework, but China agreed to major concessions when it eventually announced the agreement in principle on joint development of gas fields in the East China Sea in June 2008, as acknowledged by top Japanese diplomat Yabunaka Mitoji.<sup>73</sup> Preliminary evidence, which will necessarily have to await the opening of

<sup>71</sup> Miyamoto, *Korekara Chūgoku to dō tsukiauka*, 123–125.

<sup>72</sup> Yachi, *Gaikō no senryaku to kokorozashi: zen gaimu jimu jikan Yachi Shōtarō wa kataru*, 41–59.

<sup>73</sup> Mitoji Yabunaka, *Kokka no meibun* [The Fate of the Nation] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2010), 148–149.

diplomatic archives, suggests that Yachi and his MOFA task force engineered the terms of the 2008 Japan-China agreement in principle on joint development of ECS gas fields as part of the SMBR framework, as a continuation of the ongoing Japan-China comprehensive policy dialogue, which would eventually be headed by Yabunaka.<sup>74</sup> In all likelihood, the China-sympathetic Fukuda administration agreed to postpone the deal's announcement to assuage the Hu-Wen administration's fears of a domestic backlash for the announcement of what amounted to a substantial political concession. On the contrary, Japanese leaders needed only to concede on a symbolic matter to ameliorate Japan-China political relations: visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. China decisively cooperated with Japan through a benign silence on this issue, at both the government and propaganda levels: silence on Abe's revisionism and on the Yasukuni issue was also accompanied by public praise for postwar Japan's peaceful path, as evident by the Chinese leadership's substantial rhetoric change and the publicity accorded to soothing words towards Japan.<sup>75</sup> In short, the Japan-China diplomatic framework negotiated by Yachi, his task force, and his Chinese counterparts led to the more confident détente of 2008. Then, Fukuda greeted President Hu Jintao in Tokyo and the two governments announced a new joint statement replete with lofty principles aimed at bilateral cooperation, but the agreement in principle on the ECS was the key deliverable. The above evidence demonstrates that Japanese diplomacy was highly effective in that instance, and that it also rested on a strategic use of its balancing overtures as a further incentive for Chinese concessions.

## **6. The 2014 Abe-Xi Handshake and a Sense of Déjà Vu?**

Fast forward to the timide détente of 2014. In November of that year, quiet diplomacy paved the way for a compromise solution that saved face for both Abe and Xi. In April 2014 Xi sent Hu Deping, son of a former pro-Japan CCP secretary general, Hu Yaobang. On the Japanese side, former Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo has played an active role in mending Sino-Japanese relations during the second Abe administration, retirement from active politics notwithstanding. In mid-2008, Fukuda's soothing words and posture as a pro-China statesman were conducive to announcing a key China-Japan joint statement and in convincing the Chinese leadership to publicly endorse the aforementioned agreement in principle on joint development of gas fields in the ECS. In 2013 and 2014 Fukuda led several track II and track I dialogues between Tokyo and Beijing and has acted as an increasingly trusted

<sup>74</sup> Political correspondent of major Japanese daily newspaper, tape recording, Tokyo, 5 September 2013; Japanese scholar, 11 January 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Wen Jiabao, "Weile youyi yu hezuo" [For the Sake of Friendship and Cooperation], 12 April 2007, *Xinhua* *wang*, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-04/12/content\\_5968135.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-04/12/content_5968135.htm); Yūji Miyamoto, *Korekara Chūgoku to dō tsukiauka*, 155–157.

go-between. Examples of Fukuda's activities abound. In 2014 he represented Japan for the Japan-China-ROK wise men meeting aimed at reconciliation between the three countries; he has headed the Japanese side for the October 2013 Beijing-Tokyo Forum, promoted by Genron NPO, but with careful oversight by the two governments; and he has spoken to Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping, on many occasions, also in his capacity as chairman of China's Boao Forum for Asia.<sup>76</sup> Fukuda diplomacy seemingly validated the arguments in favour of informal Japanese actors in foreign policy making.

Yet, a close look at the underlying dynamics begs for a historical reassessment based on the Abe administration's penchant for secrecy. It was later revealed that Yachi took part in meetings with CCP leaders, including the July 2014 meeting between Fukuda and Xi Jinping.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Yomiuri reporters in charge of political affairs reported that Yachi and his trusted task force secretly negotiated the joint Japan-China parallel statements announced in November 2014; according to them, Yachi's trusted diplomat Akiba Takeo was in charge of the negotiation details in both 2006 and 2014, testifying again to the former AVM's power.<sup>78</sup> According to an engaged academic, official negotiations had actually started at the same time of Fukuda and senior LDP MPs' travels to China, implicitly corroborating this essay's analysis.<sup>79</sup> Again, Chinese overtures would gain momentum only following more decisive balancing: it is not by chance that these followed US President Barack Obama's April 2014 reassurance that the Senkaku/Diaoyu fall into the provisions of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Abe and Yachi were acting on the understanding that Chinese policy makers respected strength.

In exchange for a timid handshake and a shallow bilateral rapprochement, China requested Japan's acknowledgement of a territorial dispute, and assurances regarding prime-ministerial visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. In fact, Japan and China were still at loggerheads on fundamental matters: Japan did not formally recognize the existence of a territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and China continued sending official vessels. However, almost three years into the announcement, Abe has made no pilgrimage to the controversial war shrine. Preliminary evidence suggests that history echoed through Sino-Japanese interaction. After all, Yachi was quietly in charge of early contact with Chinese counterparts as early as 2013

<sup>76</sup> "Fukuda moto shushō to Shūshusei ga kaidan" [Former Premier Fukuda Met with Secretary Xi], *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 8 April 2013; "Nicchūkan kenjin kaigi, kankei shūfuku e kōki ikase, 11 gatsu APEC-muke taiwa o" [Japan-China-ROK Wise-men Meeting, Revive the Opportunity for a Resumption of Relations, Towards a Dialogue at the November APEC Meeting], *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 23 April 2014.

<sup>77</sup> "Abe dispatched senior bureaucrat Yachi to Fukuda-Xi meeting in Beijing," *Japan Times*, 12 October 2014; "Confidant of Xi met with Abe in Tokyo to smooth bilateral relations," *Asahi Shinbun*, 15 April 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Yomiuri Shinbun Seijibu, *Abe Kantei vs. Shū Kinpei* [Abe's Kantei versus Xi Jinping], (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 2015), 36–39.

<sup>79</sup> Shin Kawashima, "Nicchū kankei wa dō susumu no ka" [How Will Japan-China Relations Progress?], *Tōa*, no. 583 (January 2016): 11; 10–20.

and his early role in resetting bilateral relations in 2006 suggests that he also played a more active role in 2014. At the same time, it is worth stressing (again) that only the opening of diplomatic archives, and the publication of personal memoirs will reveal Yachi's role *vis-à-vis* Fukuda's. It is very possible that the Japanese government used a multiplicity of tracks to engage China in 2014. Although Abe's well-documented testy relationship with Fukuda invites suspicion, it is quite likely that the former statesman acted on behalf of formal actors, for the sake of Sino-Japanese stability and possibly in exchange for a promise from Abe to tone down his historical revisionism.

As the head of the National Security Secretariat, Yachi was responsible, through his task force, for negotiating the terms for the shallow 2014 *détente* with his Chinese counterparts. That the Japanese government inaugurated a "High-Level Political Dialogue" with Beijing—this time not from a position of undeniable politico-economic strength, however—reinforced the sense of *déjà vu* with the earlier talks under the "Japan-China Comprehensive Policy Dialogue" framework. Diplomatic overtures were integrated into Japan's strategic security policy. Interestingly, the Chinese government reserved an "unprecedented reception" for Yachi during his three-day visit in mid-July 2015. The five-hour dialogue with State Councilor Yang Jiechi was followed by meetings with Defense Chief Chang Wanquan and with Prime Minister Li Keqiang in the heart of Chinese policy making, *Zhongnanhai*.<sup>80</sup> These meetings implied that China appreciated Yachi as *the* key agent behind Japan's China policy. After all, Yachi-led quiet diplomacy became Abe's instrument of choice towards Russian and South Korean engagement in 2015 and 2016,<sup>81</sup> thus pointing at the relevance of this article's arguments.

## 7. Conclusions

Yachi has been a relatively under-appreciated protagonist of Japanese foreign policy, not least because of the Abe administration's sympathies for a foreign and security policy clouded in secrecy. This article has provided a portrait of Yachi, new in both the English- and Japanese-language literature, with an accent on his Kissingerian qualities: a preference for strategy, geopolitics, and secret diplomacy. Yet Yachi's hyper-empowered role was possible precisely because of the seemingly presidential premiership of Abe, Japan's Nixon. Moreover, the Abe government's institutionalization of secrecy within the

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<sup>80</sup> "Chūgoku, Nihon no kōkan ni irei no kōgū—Ri shushō ga anpokyoku-chō to kaidan" [China, Unprecedented Reception Accorded to High-ranking Japanese Official—Premier Li meets Head of National Security Secretariat], *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 17 July 2015.

<sup>81</sup> "Roshia no tai-nichi gaikō kiman KGB shushin Patorushefu-shi & chinichi-ha Wain-shi" [Keypersons in Russia's Japan Diplomacy: former KGB Patrushev and Japan expert Vaino], *Sankei Shinbun*, 16 December 2016; Sōichi Tsukamoto, "Nikkan, ianfu mondai kaiketsu de gōi – Kitachōsen ga kaku jikken" [Japan and South Korea agree on comfort women resolution, North Korea carries out nuclear test], *Tōa*, no. 584 (February 2016): 64–65.

newly minted National Security Council and through the State Secrecy Protection Law will further deepen the opaqueness over the conduct of public affairs in Japan. Exacerbated by the ongoing geopolitical tensions in East Asia and sense of crisis—especially felt among the conservative politico-bureaucratic establishment—the above institutional developments will likely further strengthen the role of the nation-state in Japan. It is telling that *Yomiuri Shinbun* journalists responsible for extensive reporting of Japan's international relations conclude their latest collection of articles on the *Kantei*-led China policy with a recognition of the increased hardships in reporting diplomatic affairs. In fact, many of the official sources interviewed by *Yomiuri* would decline to go into details for fear of incurring harsh punishment for divulging “diplomatic secrets.”<sup>82</sup> As the extensive case study of the 2006 rapprochement and the preliminary evidence of recent Sino-Japanese interaction have shown, Japanese overtures were deeply embedded in the government's broader strategic approach towards China. Moreover, Japanese informal actors may often act in ways complementary to, if not at the behest of, governmental ones. It is all the more significant that it is an informal process, that of secret diplomacy, that props up governmental actors' agency.

*King's College London, London, United Kingdom, March 2017*

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<sup>82</sup> *Yomiuri Shinbun* Seijibu, *Abe Kantei vs. Shū Kinpei*, 282.